

‘Critically’ reinvigorating teacher education: Issues and dilemmas

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Introduction

The intention of the workshop was to provide a space to investigate ways of reclaiming teacher education programs as sites for transformative learning. In the tradition of critical-democratic education, the intent was to create a new ‘*social imagination*’ (Greene, 1995) with its emphasis on social justice, respect for others, critical inquiry, equality, freedom, civic courage and concern for the collective good (Giroux, 1992). These are the principles and values that guide our individual and collective efforts to reinvigorate an undergraduate teacher education program. In this workshop, we attempted to address two key questions: what kinds of teachers do we require in these conservative times and how do we go about educating them?

Background

At a time when teachers’ work is being fundamentally reshaped in response to new policies and practices, a key question for us as we begin to redesign the course is, how can we best support our students so that they are well placed to respond to new demands, while also demonstrating the need for teachers to take on ‘critical positions’? Giroux argues that all educators must take ‘critical positions’, making the case for linking learning to social change and providing contexts for students to understand the power they have to contribute to effecting change in both the local and global communities (2005:xxix). This position emphasises the moral and political dimensions of the teacher’s role. However, Kincheloe notes that while teachers may agree that it is important to induce students to think critically “*few are sure how such a goal might be achieved*” (1993:22). This problem resonates with us as teacher educators as we review our Bachelor of Education courses and attempt to develop contexts that will enable pre-service teachers themselves to take critical positions.

We offered four scenarios that encapsulated the dilemmas we faced in moving towards our goal of critically re-invigorating teacher education. Each scenario focused on a different dimension of the problems of ‘doing’ critical pedagogy and used the voices of students and teachers as starting points. Through sharing our stories, we wanted to provide a space for dialogue around the daily struggles, contradictions and tensions encountered by critical teacher educators with a view to generating new strategies and tactics to engage in socially critical and just forms of teacher education.ⁱ

Scenario One: Reflecting critically - Where do we start?

In the four-year BEd at Murdoch University, students are introduced to the concept of ‘critical reflection’ in the second semester of the first year. Students submit journals that are vehicles for them to demonstrate their ‘critical engagement’ with the unit content. In

this way, the critical reflection unit provides a vehicle for students to begin to develop a critical inquiry stance.

The following extract from Rachel's final journal reflects her struggles with critical thinking.

Rachel's journal entry

I'm not sure if sometimes I am being critical and sometimes I'm not and what part of my text is which.

I almost feel like I don't have anything to reflect on because I haven't really formed many opinions or ideas about teaching. Everything we have been taught this year is so new.

Since starting uni I have formed ideas about teaching and a lot of my thinking has changed. But I don't know whether it's been because I critically reflected or because that's what we're taught so it must be right.

Rachel's self-doubt reflects her experiences of being part of a learning environment shaped by a 'banking' model of education (Freire 2005). In such an environment, where 'public theory' takes priority over biographically embedded 'private' understandings (Bullough and Gitlin 2001), students question the legitimacy of their experiential knowledge. Rachel appears not to recognise the "*apprenticeship of observation*" that she has already undergone as a learner in school (Hatton 2004, p. 6). She implies that her own life experiences fall outside the acceptable discourse or regime of truth recognised in institutions such as universities (Foucault 1980). In this sense she is 'unlearning', not learning.

The dilemma

Where is the space for someone like Rachel to continue her path to being critically reflective (as we expect of her)? And what does it mean to be an individual who exercises responsibility, control, choice and power to form her own ideas – in an environment where 'what we're taught' is still so important?

Scenario Two: The "struggles, contradictions, and tensions" encountered by one critical teacher educator in a mandatory unit titled Education for Social Justice

A core premise that informs *Education for Social Justice* is that teachers can, and do, make a difference, specifically when they enact a '*socially just curriculum*'.

Following Giroux, our aims in working with students in this unit are to affirm and interrogate the histories, memories and stories of the devalued others who have been marginalised from the official discourse of the canon; to examine how the boundaries of ethnicity, race and power make visible how whiteness functions as a historical and social construction; and to help students learn to "*speak with rather than for the Other*" (Giroux, 1992).

Student feedback on the unit, collected over several years, reflects mixed success in achieving these aims. Many students are positive.

*It opened my mind. I will be a better, more inclusive teacher because of it.
I loved it all! The content ... transformed my thinking on so many levels.
I learnt so much through this unit that I can't tell you! I found it to be very confronting.
I say bravo to those who challenged my thinking. You taught me many things and created some fantastic discussions around my kitchen bench.*

Other responses have been very different:

What did you think were the best aspects of this unit?

The best aspect of this unit was finishing it

What improvements (if any) would you suggest?

*Everything
Anti-racist content needs to be changed to ensure that white students are not affronted*

The dilemma

Such diverse attitudes are found in every tutorial group in the unit. Our concern is how to strike a balance between how we use our position of authority to silence students, and how we allow students to explore their racialised subject positions, when this gives tacit consent to being able to articulate gross racist stereotypes. Given our commitment to critical pedagogy, we do not want to silence students. On the other hand, it raises the question about the point at which we, as educators, have the responsibility to silence individual students in the interests of students as a group.

Scenario Three: Doing socially critical work in S&E: Obstacles and resources

We teach a unit on Society and Environment to fourth year undergraduate teachers. The unit is based around Ira Shor's book *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. The unit aims to provide students with a set of alternative principles and values to help guide their thinking and practice in the field of social education. By way of summary, these include participatory, affective, problem-posing, situated, multicultural, dialogic, de-socialising, democratic, researching, interdisciplinary and activist (Shor 1992, p. 17). Doing socially critical work of this kind involves investigating "why things are the way they are, how they got that way, and what set of conditions are supporting the processes that maintain them" (Simon, 1988, p. 2). In pursuing this critical-democratic project, the challenge of engaging students in critical intellectual work presents some unique obstacles as well as resources for critical educators. Consider the following student responses to the unit.

Student 1:

Make SOSE (Studies of Society and Environment) more relevant to actually teaching SOSE and less of someone's own agenda for social justice. [The]

Schools in Context unit trains us in social justice and much of the theory ... Basically for the SOSE part of the unit ... chuck in some Aboriginal social justice issues dab it with empowerment words and you know you are playing the game ... I did well in my assignment cos I know how to play the game ... pretty sure my own thoughts would have got inferior marks.

versus

Student 2:

The SOSE, particularly, had an impact on me. Its relevance to everyday life for students (if lessons are constructed appropriately) is powerful.

and

Student 3:

The SOSE text was fantastic, very relevant and meaningful to the learning I was supposed to obtain from this unit.

The dilemma

The contradictory views expressed by these three students highlight a number of key questions and dilemmas in teaching for social change. How do we dispel the myth of political neutrality in teacher education? How do we engage students who are resistant, cynical, or dismissive of social justice approaches? What conditions need to be created to enhance critical dialogue for students, teachers and teacher educators? How do we manage such diverse views among students? And how can we harness conflict and difference?

Scenario Four: Looking for a ‘critical’ approach to SEX (School Experience)

Our current School Experience units look like this:

- Students complete 90 days of ‘supervised’ School Experience over 4 years (a teacher registration requirement)
- In the first three years, School Experience consists of 2 to 3 week blocks
- There is an 8 week Internship in the final semester
- Students are assigned to a classroom teacher (called Mentor Teacher)
- Students are visited by a university based ‘Supervisor’ throughout the School Experience
- Mentor teacher and supervisor together observe, provide feedback and assess.

Several issues and concerns arise from these structures:

1. Challenging the Expert – Novice Relationship

A student wrote in his reflective journal of his school experience, “*it was impossible to be myself in an atmosphere of surveillance*”.

How can the school experience units be improved to enable [classroom] teachers to “*Step down from the role of expert and approach learners [student teachers] as equals, posing problems and questions to engage them as participants in the process of investigating, analysing and producing knowledge*” (Missingham, 2007)?

2. Avoiding Social Reproduction

When I went to Teachers College we were taught how to write lesson plans and programs. We had to have them ready before the prac and if they weren't up to scratch, we had to do them again. Students don't seem to have to do this any more. (A Mentor Teacher).

Schools are powerful agencies for social reproduction and no more so than in the education of student teachers.

3. School Experience is the 'real' thing

A student teacher was told on his first day of prac to *"forget everything you learned at uni – it's all theory"*.

In his final major assignment in response to the question, 'Demonstrate how you have used or participated in curriculum policy and other program initiatives during your final school experience,' a student wrote, *"My teacher told me that graduates don't need to be involved in this sort of stuff so I have not completed this section"*.

How can we challenge this widely held view among classroom teachers and students?

The dilemma

How do we create coherence in the BEd? For change to take place, there must be transformation and infusion of concepts, approaches and processes throughout the educational experience, not only in designated classes (Banks 2008, in Carr 2008). How might this be done in settings where students are regularly exposed to these contradictory perspectives?

Workshop Process

Our intention was to find some direction or guidance by involving other critical educators in sharing their perspectives on these challenges. Each of us presented our own dilemma as a means to begin critique and analysis and to engage others in dialectic theory building by moving between data (stories) and theory. At the same time, by establishing protocols of reciprocity and mutuality, we hoped to be able to support others who might be facing similar dilemmas. The facilitation methods were chosen because they enabled us to practice what we preach. Rather than simply banking information to a silent audience we wanted to get on-the-spot feedback and ideas from the small groups.

Three questions were used to frame the conversations:

1. What do these stories tell us about students', teachers' and teacher educators' ideologies, resistance and engagement?

2. What conditions/practices need to be created to enhance critical dialogue for students, teachers and teacher educators?
3. What are the implications of these discussions for the design of teacher education programs?

The workshop presenters joined in the small group conversations and each group member shared in the process of focusing, sustaining and recording the conversations. Finally, each group reported back on their conversations. The following section draws together some significant outcomes of the conversations that took place in each group. These outcomes have been grouped under the three discussion questions used to frame the conversations.

Outcomes

What do these stories tell us about students', teachers' and teacher educators' ideologies, resistance and engagement?

Students' diversity and different life histories must be acknowledged and taken into account when we ask them to adopt a 'critical' position. While some students are inspired when they are challenged or confronted, others turn off or resist. This becomes a problem when we deny this possibility by homogenising students and we need to find space in which to acknowledge and value student differences.

The dilemmas also demonstrate the power of teachers' prior assumptions. Not only students' prior assumptions but also those of teachers play a role in the learning. When teachers assume that students' behaviour or responses will be of a particular nature, and then teach on the basis of such assumptions, students become "*terra nullius*" in a colonising relationship.

Many students desire to be 'good' students and this shapes a certain level of compliance that works against criticality. How can we be sure that when a student overtly embraces a 'critical' position, s/he is not just being 'good'? Similarly, when a student who is invited to be critical responds by showing resistance to a position we, as teachers, might want them to take (i.e. by not being a 'good' student) — then what? This highlights the difference between choice and obligation. To what extent can we (or should we) oblige students to adopt a position that is not their choice? Furthermore, is there a continuum from being 'good' to being 'critical'? If so, should we find ways to enable students to find a position on that continuum that will allow their continuing engagement?

What conditions/practices need to be created to enhance critical dialogue for students, teachers and teacher educators?

It is important to begin critical dialogue by acknowledging the diverse experiences and positions that students bring with them and then incorporate this prior knowledge into the new learning. For this to happen, safe spaces need to be created where educators give explicit permission to students to challenge the taught content as well as each other.

‘Safe spaces’ cannot be created unless teachers acknowledge the power structures and assumptions (including both students’ and teachers’ expectations) that permeate classrooms and talk about how these affect the possibility of breaking down barriers and moving beyond constraints. Teachers can also model good listening, show trust in the students and identify their own values. Thus teachers who disclose their own struggles, doubts and uncertainties in dialogue will model and legitimise such critical processes and help create spaces that allow students to do the same. The role of the teacher in such a program is to make a stand, be soulful, create an aura. Just as students’ personal experiences should permeate the learning, so too should teachers’ experiences. Without an atmosphere of personalised relations and trust, we cannot expect students to risk different ways of learning.

What are the implications of these discussions for the design of teacher education programs?

Such processes require time that is often not available in learning contexts that are strongly curriculum-driven, such as teacher education. One solution might be to acknowledge the difference between formal and informal learning and value the latter more highly. The perspective from which we frame learning also speaks to this. For example, taking the position that “the world is what you make it” rather than acting on the assumption that “the world is what it is” places students’ agency at the forefront and directly confronts the passivity that lets a banking approach to education predominate. In other words, ‘how’ should come before ‘what’.

Programs designed with input from students and with authentic experiences at their core would promote deeper engagement. Programs should be designed from the ‘bottom up’ not from the ‘top down’, with personal histories or autobiographies used to contextualise students’ learning. However, it is important but difficult to learn about ‘what is not me’ (i.e. to learn about the ‘other’). A spiral curriculum might help this process, as new ideas are ‘seeded’ then revisited as students engage at deeper levels in the core learning. In all learning, it is important to value the ‘moment’.

Conclusion

What struck us was the importance of sharing stories and attending to the emotional aspects of pedagogy and of trusting the voices of participants to illuminate meaning. Having students involved in the discussions was particularly valuable, as they provided their particular perspective on ways for us to grapple with critical pedagogy. Each group had robust discussions about the dilemmas we raised and provided us with concrete ideas to incorporate into our practice.

To do this better, in future we would consider building rapport by getting to know others before commencing the workshop. We could then work with even smaller groups to investigate scenarios with a series of open questions: What does it look like? I wonder why? Have you thought about....? What might you think about....? We might also distribute some pre-reading, to give people time to process scenarios and ideas. Finally,

during the workshop itself, we might introduce alternative experiences, such as the creation of visual texts or role-play to explore the scenarios to foster insights and understandings and to produce meaning and evidence. Finally we would identify some actions to carry the work forward and report back to the original group, in the belief that by building a network of colleagues to sustain the struggle for social justice we are able to help create an evolving criticality that is ongoing and sustainable.

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ⁱ These scenarios are derived from the individual experiences of Jane, Barry, Nado and Anne, hence the use of individual voices in the sections which follow even if expressed as 'we' [Editor].